Extremism – Do We Need a Definition?

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About the Author

Ghaffar Hussain is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Program on Extremism. He is a writer, consultant, an international speaker with expertise on radicalization and global Jihadism. He previously managed a policy institute in London and worked as a consultant for various organizations around the world to deliver counter-extremism programs in countries such as Pakistan, Azerbaijan, US, Denmark, and Egypt.

About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of The George Washington University.

Executive Summary

- Each society needs to clearly define what it considers unacceptable if it wishes to stay functional.

- We must tackle extremism in a way that preserves civil liberties.

- A definition must be technical and workable and term 'extremism' must not become a mere adjective.

- A definition of extremism must focus on themes that undermine the core ethos of a society, which in the anglosphere context are intolerance, violence, and hatred.

Extremism – Do We Need a Definition?

Somewhat ironically, one of the more complex challenges in contemporary counter-extremism practice is defining exactly what is meant by the term 'extremism.' One could argue that the concept is culturally relative since each society will have its own view on what behaviors and thoughts are acceptable. Arriving at an objective or universal definition is further complicated by the fact that the common societal values, upon which a definition relies, are increasingly being eroded in our globalized and interconnected world. Furthermore, the term is often instrumentalized for political purposes, since competing political factions commonly use it to discredit those who oppose them, with the resulting net effect of reducing it to a slur.

However, the debate over a definition has also been re-ignited by recent pro-Gaza protests in London, and now the British government is thinking about re-vamping its current definition which is too broad and vague to have any efficacy. In this piece, I want to explore the complexities of this debate and touch upon the importance of having a societally shared understanding of what kinds of behavior are acceptable. I also want to offer a view on what a definition of extremism should contain and why this debate matters at all.

In my view, the manner in which political differences and change in a society are regulated determines how stable and strong a society is. If the mechanisms used to manage those functions are working well, and long-term stability is achieved as a result, they need to be preserved and protected. Extremism is, thus, a term used to describe modes of thinking and behavior that are rooted in a rejection of the foundations that a society is built upon. By going outside of the existing framework, extremists undermine the very system that allows that society to exist in the manner in which it does. Over time, if this action is allowed to continue unchecked, the delicate fabric that holds a society together begins to tear.

As such, it is important for a society to identify and challenge such threats without resorting to the kind of tyranny and oppression that undermines the credibility on which the system is built. This challenge is especially acute for free societies since they pride themselves on being able to manage and accommodate a diverse range of viewpoints in a rules- and values-based framework built on consensus. They have to allow for the expression of opinions that are unpopular, and even challenging, whilst identifying and policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. This is a difficult balance to achieve without a clear understanding of where those boundaries are and the nature of the threats that exist.

Thus, the extremism that we are seeking to capture by a definition is political in nature and, since political change necessitates social action, the definition needs to be conscious of both the causes and tactics that various political actors adopt. Causes can be extremist in nature even when they do not call for criminal actions, just as tactics can be extremist even if the cause is not. ISIS is an example where both the cause and tactics are extreme, but with ETA, the tactics were extreme but the cause was not necessarily. On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood is an example of an extremist cause that does not always adopt extremist tactics depending on the location and period in history. Therefore, for an organization or individual to be branded extremist, either the cause or the tactics must be extreme.

In an Anglosphere context, extreme causes are those that seek to create a social order in which the current values, and mechanisms for regulating change, are upended in favor of a system that is anathematic to the current one. In such a system, democratic norms are abolished, the concept of equality is denigrated or 'reinterpreted,' and political differences of any kind are simply not tolerated. Such systems are usually dictatorial, authoritarian and built on values that cannot be challenged or debated. Power is usually centralized, held by a clique of despotic rulers, and change is not possible. Nazi Germany or the Caliphate of ISIS would be good examples.

Extremist tactics are those that involve violence, the promotion of hatred towards other groups in society (which can either be rooted in immutable characteristics or simply other view points) and denying such groups their basic human rights. They also include the destruction of public or private property, making death threats, or engaging in other forms of behavior which are criminal. Extremists generally seek political change regardless of the consequences of the methods adopted since the belief in the necessity of change is so intense and uncompromising. Hence, their tactics frequently stray into criminality and doing physical harm to others.

The word 'violence' in this context means physical force being used as a tactic to achieve change, as opposed to unintended violent altercations taking place. It must be an expressed aim of the group or individual to use violence as a means of achieving stated goals against all or any specific type of target. Violent means must also be differentiated from terrorism, since the latter refers to a specific form of violence which usually acts as a form of theatre in which the murder of one or many individuals takes place with the purpose of raising the profile of a cause.

The fact that the actions must be in pursuit of a political goal should be an integral part of any definition. There are many actions that are arguably extreme but not extremist, as for example, forced marriages, so-called honor killings, domestic violence etc. There are also actors who are arguably extreme without being extremists, such as members of the Flat Earth Society or those who hold other such bizarre views. Thus, extremism is not about actions or views that can be described as extreme, unless they are

adopted for a political goal, which means they normally form part of a much wider meta-narrative rooted in an ideological outlook. As such, religious fundamentalists would also not be classified as extremist if they were not using violence or promoting hatred for a wider political goal.

There is a secondary discussion to be had around the point at which the state should intervene with a commonly shared definition allowing for the clarity of thought that is required for such targeted action to take place. Arguably, it is not illegal to be an extremist, so one can believe in an extremist cause without expecting state intervention of any kind. However, anyone who adopts, promotes or is likely to embrace extremist tactics, with or without an extremist cause, should expect the state to intervene. Thus, the state should remain more focused on the tactical side since it has a role to play in protecting society and minimizing harm.

Challenging those who believe in extremist causes is, arguably, also a role of the state and civil society, but strategically that response must be approached very differently. A free society should allow people to hold and express such views within reason as long as they do not veer towards criminality of any kind. It should also seek to actively discredit them through open dialogue and critical discourse in which such outlooks are legally tolerated but challenged in civil society. This is a much harder issue to tackle since it requires a society to still have faith in its core values and the willingness to protect those values when they are threatened. I would suggest that spirit is somewhat absent currently.

A definition of extremism, however, only holds for as long as a society is open and fair. The aim of a democratic and free society is to ensure there is no need for anyone to adopt extremist tactics because change is possible through participation. There will always be those who adopt extremist causes but they can be minimized if there is a common set of values that holds people together. A society that can manage diverse viewpoints without falling apart is healthy, but one that refuses to challenge existential threats will weaken and inevitably fail. Stability requires strength, moral clarity and a clear understanding of what the threats are: if those things do not exist, then over time, neither does the society.